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Ending the '60s

By PETE HAMILL

WASHINGTON.

Finally, on a cold bright Sunday morning, with the streets cleared of refuse and tear gas canisters, and the khaki jeeps returned to the armories, and the bitter smell of tear gas replaced again by burning leaves, the Capitol of the Republic became its old implacable self again. The great stone piles of the government buildings were quiet. Men watched football on a thousand TV sets. In isolated areas, the police were settling some last small arguments with their invaders, but to them the process was now one of fumigation rather than combat. It was over. All of it.

And it is unlikely that we shall see anything like it again. We will never see anything like that Saturday morning when we walked through the cold morning air along Constitution Av., with streams of children on all sides of us, heading for the Mall of the Capitol building, thousands of them, with sweet clear faces, carrying their ponchos, duffle bags and youth, seven or eight deep on both sides of the streets, coming like tributaries from some secret source heading for a wild and terrible basin. They had come from everywhere, to shout out for life. You could look at them only once and know that they were not what was wrong with America.

We will never see them again precisely like this: spreading out across the Mall, their peers marshaling them with precision and manners, while in the distance flags billowed in the breeze, red and black, like the emblems of some giant Arab army in those old movies about holy wars. They moved among each other without hostility, free in some strange way from the impacted resentments of my generation. They held signs that said, "Thank you, Mr. Nixon, for bringing us together," and "Fighting for peace is like balling for chastity," and some of them shivered under the hard blue sky, and others shared their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and others bobbed in a morning dance. We have always been a country devoid of gorgeous splendor, but on this Saturday they were to provide it all.

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Eugene McCarthy's voice was echoing out of the speakers' stand, charged with his peculiarly moving brand of airy emotion, saying that "no one knows what the 'silent majority' in America thinks. If there is such a silent majority, it is a challenge to American democracy. On an issue as grave as Vietnam the majority should not be silent after four years of growing military involvement . . . 52,000 Western Union telegrams and a telephone poll do not establish what the silent majority believes."

They roared for McCarthy, and then followed quietly when the parade moved out to the already familiar cadence of muffled drums. It was 10:27, and an initial contingent went forward like slow and deliberate blocking backs to clear Constitution Av., and behind them came the drums, and the men bearing the 12 coffins which contained the names of the war dead. As they marched, streams of children continued to file down the side streets heading for the end of the march. They waved at each other in some random mood of brotherhood, as if already understanding the sense of loss they would carry with them at the end of the day.

The government had made a wall of Washington buses against any mass assault on the back doors of the White House, but the marchers ignored them and kept moving, turning finally onto the great open greensward of the Mall at the foot of the Washington Monument. They came to the brow of a hill, and below us we could see the cluster of makeshift tents and platforms that would be the center of the day.

How to explain that afternoon? Details: Richie Havens singing with fierce passion about freedom; the earth, wet from the rains of the night before, turning to hard mud, and reporters clustering around hot coffee urns in a plastic tent; Peter Yarrow running the stage, and the shrill contempt-filled voices of women radicals; Paul O'Dwyer on the speakers' platform with his white hair riffing in the breeze; photographers swaying on a platform. And all the while the hill at the base of the Monument filling up, like a multi-colored carpet, blotting out the green in every direction, and freshly arrived reporters telling that they were now spreading out behind the Monument, beyond our vision.

Nobody knew how many were there, neither the reporters nor the police; it could have been a half-million; it could have been more. At some point I climbed up on the steel pipe structure which held the great sound system, to look; I had never seen so many people in one place in my life, not even when Lyndon Johnson's Asian clients were assembling entire nations, during one of his public relations marches through the Orient.

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I remember this: David Dellinger, a middle-aged man who should know better, shouting hoarsely into the microphone, encouraging children to go to the Justice Dept. later, where they were certain to be tear-gassed, arrested or worse. At his side were Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, the stand-up comics of the boy revolutionaries; Rubin, great non-conformist that he is, displayed the wig he wears to disguise the dread short haircut he received in prison. You could tell by looking at them that when the gas went off they would not be breathing it.

I remember the boy revolutionaries crowding around the press entrance near the stage, with their flags billowing, and the rumors that they would storm the stage when George McGovern spoke, to strike down the vicious liberal enemy; the young marshals, arms locked together, holding them back; while the scent of incense drifted everywhere, and someone who had been at both places came over to say that it was two Woodstocks. Timothy Leary, his tanned face ravaged and lined, dressed in buckskin and white ducks, like some Southern California version of Dorian Gray. Dick Gregory told Agnew jokes, and Phil Hutchins of SNCC drove off thousands with one of those endless globs of bleary leftist rhetoric about the Third World. But there were to be two superb moments which everyone there would carry forever.

The first came when Pete Seeger started to sing "All we are saying is give peace a chance." It started slowly, and then Mitch Miller was there, waving his arms to lead the crowd, and Mary Travers was beside them, and the song came chanting down, the first chant Americans have ever sung in such numbers, the crowd swaying to the music, like a rippling carpet, and Seeger saying: "Are you listening, Nixon? Are you listening, Agnew? Are you listening in the Pentagon?" and the music going on, for eight and a half minutes, everyone in the place locked into it. I ran into a tough saloon fighter I know who had tears in his eyes, who kept saying: "I've never seen anything like it. Never."

The other moment was also musical, as it had to be. Words don't mean much to a lot of these kids, and the dreary words of the rigid left must mean even less, like some odd form of static. The second moment came late in the day, when the grease was showing at the base of the Monument, and hundreds were already on the way to the Justice Dept. to receive their gassing for the likes of David Dellinger. The cast of "Hair" assembled on stage with beautiful Melba Moore singing out across that clamorous field, all about the age of Aquarius and then about letting the sunshine in. And the kids really joined in this one, while the stage became jammed, and someone let out a flock of doves. One dove skimmed over the crowd in a kind of salute and winged its way past them and past the Washington Monument and out into the cold city which had forced all of them to assemble here.

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That last chorus said it all: Young kids, open and free about so many things, joined together, some of them swaying joyfully on each other's backs, a girl in a glossy black raincoat with her hands joined to other marshals and her head turned to watch the stage. Others crying, they were there to say farewell to the 1960s, a desperate and bloody era, one that had begun with John Kennedy standing in weather like this telling them that the torch had passed to a new generation, and now, looking out at them, you remembered that when Kennedy was inaugurated most of them were only 10. The new generation was us; Thank God we had done better.

So they had grown up with Richard Speck coming in the night window with his knife and Charles Whitman climbing to his tower; they had watched the limousine pass the Texas Book Depository a hundred times on TV, and seen Oswald's contorted face, and remembered clearly how Robert Kennedy had moved through the crowds of California, and what Gene McCarthy had done in New Hampshire; they knew about that, and about Woodstock, and what the cops had done in the night in Chicago, and the way the fires had burned in Watts, and Newark and Cleveland and Washington; they knew that Martin Luther King was dead and Eldridge Cleaver was in Algeria, and that 12,000 miles from where they stood on the damp American earth, singing about hope, Americans were being slaughtered over abstractions.

At 5:52, on Nov. 15, the last chorus ended and the sixties were over. They had begun in hope, and ended with Richard Nixon in the White House and Spiro Agnew threatening other Americans with "separation," and when the crowd drifted away, there was no feeling left except remorse and loss and waste. The country had failed those children, and you could promise them nothing any more except dark and fearful future.